

CHAPTER FOUR

Steering Clear, Hanging Out, and Hooking Up

I saw that the students' most active and alive moments, and indeed the great majority of their school time, was spent not with teachers and subject-matter affairs, but in their own small group interactions ... I frequently asked informants, "Which would you rather do, flunk a test or eat alone in the cafeteria?" Invariably the answer was, "Flunk a test!"

—Philip Cusick, 1973

FROM THE LUNCHROOM: Tandi started talking to a guy named Dwayne. They started arguing. Apparently she used to date him and he did her wrong. They were yelling at each other. At first Jamar stood next to Tandi, but then she came back to stand by me and watched them. Tandi walks away from the boy and starts crying. Jamar said, "I told her he was bad news, but did she listen to me?" ... Tandi was crying and in a bad mood the rest of the period. She walked over to a group of all black people in courtyard No. 1 and they asked her what was wrong. She said, "People runnin' their mouths." They finally guessed that it was Dwayne. Another black boy came up twice and put his arm around Tandi and asked if she was all right. Jamar said, "He's no good either. He used to date my cousin. I'm not even going to get into that story."¹

Tracy spent much time discussing a boy named Randall, who I believe is older, and is her boyfriend. She wanted to plan a party for Randall's birthday, which is two months away. She said he wanted a "drink till you drop" party ... I got the impression that Tracy's mother does not approve of Randall.²

Adolescents are acutely aware that who they associate with affects their own status. Often disassociation is a prerequisite to desirable associations. In early adolescence, disassociating yourself from your parents, in at least some ways,

is virtually a prerequisite for associating with high status peers. A girl from a Catholic school notes, “Those freshmen who were driven by their parents occupied the lowest status, because it was very ‘uncool’ to be associated with your parents in public, no matter where you were.”³ Avoiding low status peers is also important. A New Jersey male reports, “It was critical to one’s status to be seen talking only to people in your own status group. By talking to someone who was beneath you, you ran the risk of lowering your own status.”⁴ These avoidance concerns obviously restrict interaction between groups.

Even within some groups, the willingness of others to associate and interact is associated with rank. A field observer studying a group of sophomore preppies at WWHS reports the following incident:

One boy I watched for some time, Adam, is not a leader, but not really an outsider either. Today he seemed a little uncomfortable—self-conscious. He asked Morris a question and Morris was pretty short and to the point. Adam looked as if he wanted to converse longer with Morris, and he seemed slightly distressed that Morris showed so little interest. Adam almost immediately began looking for something in his book bag and cursing ... as he rummaged.⁵

Adam tries to disguise even this seemingly trivial incident of rejection. He acts as if he stops talking to Morris because he needs something in his book bag, rather than because he has been “dissed” by Morris. Moreover, he immediately tries to literally increase his centrality in the group: “At first ... he was sort of [sitting] on the outside [of the group]; it looked like he really thought about it and made a big effort to make himself move closer into the circle.”⁶ His intense concern with association and acceptance is made apparent by his attempts to move physically to a more central position in the group in order to offset Morris’s rejection. Apprehension and distress about rejection are common.⁷

A girl from suburban Washington, DC, says:

Bad grades and fights with my mother were nowhere near as traumatizing as not being included in some social activity, a disagreement with a friend, or not having a date for homecoming. Acceptance within my peer group and a feeling of belonging were the key to my happiness. As superficial as it sounds, being elected to the homecoming court my senior year ... was the highlight of my four years ...⁸

Close associations are so important that for some they shape academic and non-academic contexts. “Who you walk into the pep-rallies and who you sit with make the whole world of difference. In fact, you will often see cliques (preps in particular) meeting outside so that they may walk in together.”⁹

A student reports, “It was amazing that year after year, the popular group managed to have almost identical class schedules so they could literally be together every minute. This particular group sat together and associated with few outsiders unless they required help with homework.”¹⁰ More typically, whether people are willing to associate is conditioned by the purpose and context of the interaction.

Associations are not simply an individual concern. Groups care about who their members hang out with; the status of all is affected. How carefully each other’s associations are monitored depends when, where, and why they occur. When you are with your own group, others should be tuned out. At other times, ties with non-members are acceptable. As is often the case, these “rules” are usually applied less rigorously to those who already have high status. Now let us turn to a crucial factor affecting the status relevance of associations: whether they are instrumental or expressive.

INSTRUMENTAL AND EXPRESSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Instrumental relationships are formed for some specific purpose or goal; expressive relations are those that have no specific purpose but focus on companionship. Strictly instrumental relationships usually limit or restrict emotional intimacy. Judges should not try cases that involve friends or family members; teachers should not have romantic relationships with their students. *Expressive relationships*, on the other hand, necessarily involve emotional intimacy and attachments. Detached, emotionally uninvolved individuals may be co-workers or acquaintances, but they are rarely considered friends. Obviously some relationships are a mixture of instrumental and expressive elements. The theory of status relations predicts instrumental relations will be treated differently from expressive relationships. In India, Brahmins can supervise low-caste workers in the fields, but they do not fraternize or eat with them. The boss may work closely with subordinates, but does not normally socialize with them—except perhaps at a few official social functions. Parallel processes are clearly at work in high schools. A guy from a small Texas town observes, “During regulation school hours a student would ‘hang’ or ‘chill’ with his or her own clique and not express more than a ‘hello’ to members of other cliques. This was especially a trend of preps . . . One can converse with members in different groups in classrooms, but outside classes, conversation ended.”¹¹ The taboo against associating with those in other cliques did not apply when it came to schoolwork; you could be friendly to people not in your strata as long as it was required or advantageous. This same process is seen in a wide range of schools. A student reports that in her Hispanic Catholic school, “Everyone gets along in class, but it’s very segregated outside.”¹² A girl from Corpus Christi, Texas, says: “The real test for most of the friendships formed [in class] came after school. If apparent friends hung out together beyond the

school and [extracurricular] activities realm, then it was typically a sign of true friendship.”¹³ The very same people are treated quite differently at different times; those treated as friends in one context are ignored or shunned in another. “I found myself unable to say ‘hi’ to many in the hallways who had been my friends at the start of the year, because they were not ‘cool.’”¹⁴ Other research has indirectly pointed to the difference between instrumental (goal-oriented) associations and expressive (companionship-oriented) associations. Professor of Education Pamela Bettis reports, “White honors students often noted that their after-school friendships were more homogeneous than their in-school friendships.”¹⁵

The more intimate an expressive relationship, the more associations are socially regulated. Sex and eating are near universal symbols of intimacy. Consequently, nearly all societies have rules about with whom one can sleep and eat. In the Indian caste system, where status differences are crucial, marrying and eating with members of your own caste (or a closely related one) are central features of the social structure. Especially important are publicly visible relationships. Covert indiscretions may be tolerated; conspicuous ones are not. Teenagers are no exception. More concretely, they are preoccupied with who “goes out with” (or “hooks up with”) whom and who eats with whom in the lunchroom. These are the kinds of associations that most affect and symbolize one’s status.

Adolescent women usually show more concern about expressive relationships than men. One study notes, “On the whole, females appeared more ‘expressive’ than males with greater emphasis on being pleasant and caring in interactions.”¹⁶ This gender difference is due in part to the greater importance of associations as a source of women’s status. As we will see later, this concern can also lead to some very mean-spirited behavior by women toward other women.

If intimacy can express approval, *forced intimacy* can express disapproval. Perhaps the most degrading kinds of relationships are those that involve unwanted intimacy. Sexual harassment, rape, torture, cannibalism, and the forced feeding of those on hunger strikes are examples. In these cases one actor forces intimacy upon the other. As we shall see, milder forms of forced intimacy are also found in high school settings.

TYPES OF ASSOCIATIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

DATING AND HOOKING UP

For teenagers perhaps the most crucial form of intimate expressive relationship is dating. As one girl noted, “Another huge part of association ... is dating, the importance of which cannot be overstated.”¹⁷ The archetypal tales are about dating female cheerleaders and male athletes. In a study of a South Texas high school the men were ambivalent about cheerleaders, but dating them was clearly a means of raising one’s status.

[T]hey saw “going with a cheerleader” as guaranteeing their coolness and masculinity. Particularly the less attractive males plotted the seduction of these young women and reveled in the idea of having them as girlfriends. When expressing their views publicly to other males, however, they often accused the cheerleaders of being “stuck up” or “sluts” ... These highly prized females become, therefore, dangerous, status-confirming creatures that were easier to “relate to” in rhetorical performances than in real life. Only those males with very high social status could actually risk relating to and being rejected by the cheerleaders ...¹⁸

Similarly, girls can increase their status by dating star athletes. A young lady from Vienna, Virginia, recounts the “tragic” story of a classmate who dropped a very good-looking soccer player in order to date the quarterback of the football team. The quarterback soon sustained an injury and could no longer play. The status of both declined and they soon broke up.¹⁹

In most schools, race and ethnicity are an important consideration in forming romantic relationships. A young woman from the same county, but a different school, reports that an African-American guy and an Asian girl were assigned seats next to one another and got along well. Nobody made a big issue of it. “But when they went to a football game together, rumors started to spread and the black girls started to question the black guy’s status and loyalty to their race.”²⁰

Of course, age and grade (i.e., year-in-school) influence dating patterns. One of our field observers at WWHS reports, “I asked Lacey if the date worked out with the guy she was supposed to ask. She said she called him, but he wasn’t interested because she is a freshman. He is a junior and although he did not have a date, he did not want to go with a freshman.”²¹ On the other hand, there is a clear tendency for men to date slightly younger women. As a young female from rural Pennsylvania notes, this has an important consequence for dating opportunities: “As we got older ... the girls’ dating pool of acceptable partners shrank as they progressed through the grade levels, while boys actually had wider options, both due to the common belief that the boy should be the older partner, especially to maintain status [and if boys] wanted to still have that submissive partner required by the stereotype ...”²²

Being involved in an ongoing romantic relationship tended to increase your status within a group. One of the observers at WWHS reports:

[A couple] often became the center of attention. Many times, others from the group would crowd around these two and attempt to engage in conversation with them. It was a frequent occurrence for several of the boys to tease the male or try to wrestle with him. Clearly, dating was seen in a positive light for the individuals in my group and being part of a couple tended to improve a person’s status.²³

But the other side of the story was that one's group limited who one could date. Trying to date someone of a different group or a different status may lead to rejection and ridicule, as the following story by an observer at WWHS indicates.

The conversation . . . around the table was [about] a love letter that one of the group's members, Dana, received from a member of another group, Cecil. The incident was discussed first [and] then the actual letter made the rounds and was read aloud to the shrieks and delight of all. The letter was first an apology (for some incident I don't know about), then a statement that the author liked her friends and that he hoped that they liked him, then the statement that Cecil liked Dana the best and thought she was beautiful. Dana showed great disdain and the rest of the group laughed about the note.²⁴

The emergence of romantic relationships is obviously rooted in puberty and biological maturation as well as psychosocial development.²⁵ But this does not explain why adolescents are so preoccupied with *other* people's relationships, and especially who is "going out with" whom. Only by understanding the centrality of status and the nature of status relationships can we make sense of these patterns. Often students who go out together have relatively shallow emotional attachments and are primarily conforming to an expected social form that provides them respect and status.²⁶ As we shall see later, where status concerns are less intense, the significance of dating tends to decline.²⁷

In some schools traditional dating is passé or limited to very special events, like the senior prom. Students often go to places in groups, but they do not usually have an explicit "date" with another individual. In the course of such social events, or following them, couples may "hook up." This is a deliberately ambiguous and variable term. It implies some kind of sexual relationship, but does not necessarily mean that a couple had sexual intercourse. The exact connotation differs by crowds, schools, and communities. This pattern is more characteristic of younger students. Older students with steady boy- or girl-friends are more likely to go out as a couple on occasion, even if it is not defined as a formal date.

FOOD AND FOOD FIGHTS

In some respects, whom you eat with has even more importance than dating because this occurs every day. A male from suburban Northern Virginia says, "[There was] a great deal of concern as to what the lunch arrangements would be. As freshmen, people scurried around the lunch room, searching desperately

for friends to sit with, so that they would not have to suffer the ultimate embarrassment of eating alone or sitting at an uncool table.”²⁸ A young man from Boulder, Colorado, says, “Eating alone wasn’t cool, and [since my school had] three different lunch periods, I couldn’t always find a friend who I’d want to eat with ... And when I sat with friends in the cafeteria I always felt that my level of coolness was being judged by the respective status of each individual I was with.”²⁹

Eating can be an important symbol in other settings. Going on a date to an expensive restaurant symbolizes the importance of the event, especially if others know about it.

Raquel was having trouble deciding what restaurant to go to for prom. She and her date Tommy had decided upon Chili’s as a possibility. Jenna said, “You want something fancy” ... Todd said, “Chili’s isn’t fancy ... if you want a fancy restaurant you should go to Harrington’s” ... Rachael wrote all the restaurants down on pieces of paper ... She put the slips of paper in the hat and drew out Steak Barn. Laughing, she said, “I’m going to draw again.” She drew out Harrington’s, which made Todd gleefully shout, “I told you!”³⁰

Even the parking lots of fast food establishments have significance:

Another important place to show off your status was the McDonald’s parking lot. I know it sounds weird, but the parking lot would be full of teenagers just eating and hanging around on any weekend night. I had the privilege to witness this phenomenon many times, as I used to be an employee of this prestigious firm. People would go there and smoke and try to look cool, with their fancy cars and cool clothes. It was very important to look cool just standing ... outside McDonald’s.³¹

Keep in mind that not any parking lot will do. The most frequented are those associated with food and drink. Part of this is a practical matter; teenagers do get hungry. The significance of these locales cannot be comprehended, however, unless the significance of food as a symbol of expressive intimacy is also understood.

Two other interesting phenomena make more sense when seen in the context of a theory of status relationships. One is the tendency of lunch groups to share food. In some groups people will literally reach over and take food from someone’s plate without asking. In other groups, people go through the ritual of asking, but it is usually considered inappropriate to refuse. Bargaining may go on about what is to be given in return, but in the groups that have high solidarity, anything more than playful bargaining is looked upon as inappropriate.

Often what is being shared is very common and the amounts are small; the main thing that is going on is clearly symbolic rather than practical. In the closest groups, sharing food comes close to being a form of communion, a sacrament in the religious sense. A fieldworker reports, "The group [nine sophomores, one senior; six girls, four boys; seven whites, two African Americans, one Asian Indian-American] ... shared food communally ... it was placed in the middle of the table and everyone took what they wanted. I also noticed there was no real leader of the group."³²

This use of food to express intimacy helps to make sense out of what may seem to be a completely different phenomenon: throwing food. One field observer at first thought her group of second-year students was especially immature because of the frequent food fights. "When I learned later that such food fights were common in many cliques, I decided these were 'normal' sophomores."³³ A different observer reports:

Brian brought grapes ... He began throwing them at Jessie, who then in turn threw them right back. There was definitely a little flirting going on between the two ... Jessie turned to me and explained that she was going skiing over the weekend with her boyfriend. Her boyfriend went to ... the school she had transferred from just a few months before ... It was funny to watch the ways in which the boys acted around the girls. If they felt they were not getting enough attention they would start throwing grapes at them.³⁴

Obviously, one of the reasons that students throw food instead of other things is because it is at hand. But other potential projectiles are sometimes even more available—wadded paper, used drinking and eating containers, and—for the many groups that eat outside—sticks, small rocks, dirt, etc. Yet, our observations show that food is clearly the projectile of choice. The most common kind of food throwing is between friends. Usually this involves mock conflict that is more an expression of solidarity than of hostility. Sometimes it is an expression of romantic or sexual interest, of desired intimacy.

Because food implies intimacy, it is also a useful symbol of aggression or hostility; thrown food can symbolize unwanted or forced intimacy—like sexual harassment. A black female observer at WWHS reports the following incident involving a group of African-American girls: "A senior female threw orange peels at a group of 'hippies' seated on the ground not far away. Seemed to be ritual harassment. They did not respond. Another girl wrote things on the table [that] she did not like about some other groups. Others added to the list."³⁵ The combination of the food throwing and listing what is not liked about other groups makes it clear that this is an act of disrespect.

Throwing food seems to be more insulting than another kind of relatively harmless projectile. Throwing a hard object or spitting on someone—not to

speak of urinating on someone³⁶—would be too hostile an act that would clearly bring negative sanctions from both peers and school officials. Throwing food is “appropriately hostile.” If school officials intervene, the sanctions are likely to be relatively mild. The ambiguity about the precise meaning of food throwing is also useful. The recipient can ignore the insult without losing face or return it in kind without escalating the conflict. Some groups eat lunch together, not so much because they are attracted to each other, but because other groups reject them. A group known as “Don and Company” was observed by a fieldworker. He concluded that they did not really like one another very much. He happened to note that they mainly threw food but rarely shared it.³⁷ This is what the theory would predict. While food throwing combined with food sharing can express intimacy, trust, or desire, when there is only food throwing it is much more likely to express underlying hostility.

In many high schools, seniors are allowed to leave the school grounds for lunch while other students must eat on the school premises. Underclassmen may have “their own table” in the school cafeteria, but seniors can have “their own place” off campus. In some schools going to another group’s place can result in harassment and even fights. The privilege of having lunch off school grounds is highly valued by seniors, and is sometimes used by teachers as a means of social control. In one school seniors who were caught smoking on school grounds were forced to eat lunch in the cafeteria. The sanction was quite effective.

Food not only symbolizes already established intimacy and solidarity, but also can be a means to establish these. When middle- and upper-class Americans want to get to know someone better, they invite them to dinner. In her book about teenagers entitled *A Tribe Apart*, Patricia Hersch reports how she went about establishing rapport with students after school hours:

My passport into their private lives was food. Lots of it. I ate subs by the lake with Jessica while she expounded her theories of love and friendship; I had M&M’s with Courtney while she told me about her new boyfriend; leftover Chinese with Ann while she went on about her parents. Charles and I discussed race over pizza. Chris and I consumed Chicken McNuggets at McDonald’s while dissecting the seventh grade. I had more McDonald’s, Roy Rogers, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut in the years of this book than during the previous decade.³⁸

In other words, sharing food was the means of lowering her status to establish the intimate rapport she needed for good reporting. For similar reasons eating lunch with students was the primary form of my fieldwork.³⁹

In sum, the teenage preoccupation with who eats with whom in the lunchroom is not primarily due to developmental immaturity. Rather, this is one

aspect of the much broader issue of symbolizing intimacy in expressive relationships when status is an important consideration. While ninth grade lunch cliques, adult dinner parties, Holy Communion, power lunches, Princeton eating clubs, and reporters taking their informants to lunch are different in detail, all are ways of affecting people's status because sharing food is a near universal symbol of intimacy.

KNOWLEDGE, SECRETS, AND RUMORS

If sex and food are the common physical symbols of intimacy in social associations, knowledge about another person is a less material form of intimacy. Intimacy is even more strongly implied when only a few are privy to the information; that is, when there are *secrets*. Teenagers and pre-teenagers sometimes seem to be obsessed with secrets. Sharing secrets with someone is a sign of intimacy and trust. Conversely, those not let in on the secret are kept at a distance. Often secrets involve some kind of deviance. The most obvious example is the secrets that adolescents do not want parents, teachers, and other adults to know. Frequently these involve forms of sexual behavior and use of drugs or alcohol. A key thing that separates adolescent from adult culture is the information that is not supposed to be shared with adults. Such secrecy is not restricted to matters of sex, alcohol, and drugs, but to the very nature of their peer society:

Status didn't matter when accompanied by parents. When parents were around two individuals would act as though they had been friends all of their lives even though they didn't hang around each other during school. The biggest reason is that students didn't want to let their parents in on what went on during school. To them school was their time and what went on was on a need-to-know basis, and parent's didn't need to know.⁴⁰

This is a report from a small town; other individuals in other settings might be less concerned about secrecy from adults, but the general tendency operates in most communities.

Secrets also divide teenagers; they should be shared with friends and members of your clique or crowd. As we shall see shortly, keeping secret information about the time and locale of social events is a key means of status differentiation. On the other hand, breaking a confidence is a form of disrespect, and frequently is associated with rejection and exclusion. The incident described earlier in which Dana shows Cecil's love letter to everyone (p. 76) is a clear case of violating confidences in order to create social distance. Dana passes Cecil's love letter around and ridicules his interest in her. Not only is he rejected, but his attempts at intimacy in the form of a love letter are transformed into public knowledge.

Too much association with those of another crowd is problematic; secrets may be revealed to outsiders. A fieldworker reports the following incident: “I saw one of the [black] girls that used to sit at their table and I noticed that she was hanging with an all white group and her and Tandi didn’t even speak to each other. I asked Tandi about it, and she said she found out that the girl ... had been ‘telling all their business’ to Tazy, and suddenly started hanging with white girls.”⁴¹ The offense is not just racial disloyalty, but sharing secrets with outsiders. Another significance of secrecy as a form of intimacy is to be able to claim that higher status people share secrets with you—that you are one of the high status crowd who is “in on” everything.⁴²

If there are secrets, there will be *rumors*.⁴³ A lack of reliable knowledge can be remedied by speculation or fabrication—by “making it up.” Not sharing rumors—keeping them secret—can be interpreted as a lack of intimacy and trust: “Liz and Bill are definitely a couple, still sitting in each other’s laps and holding hands. They also were having a disagreement today, something involving Bill having heard a rumor about her and refusing to tell her what it was.”⁴⁴ I will discuss gossip later, but it is clear that rumors can be an integral part of gossip. Sometimes rumors are used as gossip in order to maintain group interest and solidarity: “The only topics of conversation were the fact (or rumor) that a girl named Tammy ... is pregnant. They seemed very knowledgeable about the subject, but when I asked who the girl was, they said they didn’t know her.”⁴⁵ Sometimes the “knowledge” is deliberately distorted, that is, there is rumor mongering, intended to harm others: “I asked them where the other girls were that they used to sit with. The response was, ‘They are all two-faced. They were spreading rumors and trying to instigate fights. They are hoochies. They tried to start fights between us and other people.’”⁴⁶ Even when the motives are not specifically malicious, the tone of rumors and gossip is usually negative. Since the most common motivation for secrecy is to hide various forms of transgression, rumor and gossip tend to focus on deviance. Hence, the characterization of secret behavior is seldom positive. Later I will discuss gossip and say more about why rumors and gossip tend to be negative.

To summarize, secrets and rumors are crucial mechanisms in the competition for status. Therefore they are especially characteristic of social systems in which status is a central resource—as is the case in American high schools. Of course, most people intuitively “know all of this.” The theory of status relationships enables us to see the parallel between the different kinds of intimacy, for example, between food fights and spreading rumors. Both are expressions of intimacy that can be used to express either solidarity or hostility.

Now let us shift from secrets about personal experiences to an activity that by its very nature must be a shared group experience: the party.

PARTYING

A fieldworker at WWHS recorded the following account:

Mora told them that her parents were going away for the weekend and she was going to be home alone. Lacey and Macy got excited and decided that they should have a party. Cassic exclaimed, "This is a chance of a lifetime!" Emily chipped in that she wanted to come. Mora said that her parents said, "We can trust you now," and that she can have "a couple of friends over." They were very excited to think of what they could do this coming weekend.⁴⁷

The most important event for displaying and acquiring status is the party. This is a purely expressive event, the essence of which is associating with others. A party is more public than a date, but can still be relatively exclusive. Often parties involve some form of deviance from adult norms. This most typically takes the form of drinking alcoholic beverages and in some cases using drugs. Moreover, it nearly always implies and often involves romantic or sexual liaisons. Being invited to the right parties is a mark of high status. This frequently requires keeping secret the time and location of such parties—so those who are not wanted do not show up. A source of upward mobility is providing an attractive location for parties or a supply of alcohol. Cooperative parents or an older sibling who can legally buy the needed beverages is a great asset.

In most high schools, frequent partying is the essence of being part of the "popular crowd." The significance of parties in most high schools is captured well by a male from Vermont:

The principal social activity of the "cool" group was having parties at various people's houses or at random outdoor locations. Because everyone was under 21 and alcohol and drugs were usually in abundance, the location and times of these parties were kept secret ... [S]imply finding out the location of these parties was difficult unless you knew someone in the cool group ... These parties were not so exclusive that someone would be asked to leave ... However, if you had no friends or people to talk to, you could probably not help feeling out of place. Still, despite an implicit exclusivity, these parties represented the most universal social scene for my high school ... [W]hile there was a central group ... who were always at these gatherings, numerous groups of other people could come and go without seeming out of place.⁴⁸

In many high schools, there are different kinds of parties. The relatively exclusive parties of the popular crowd are usually by invitation only. "Crashing" such a party can provoke conflict and fights. Those from relatively well-to-do backgrounds also have more formal versions of the exclusive party, which are usually sponsored by adults: debutante balls, coming out parties, and country

club dances. In contrast to these, some parties emphasize solidarity and togetherness as well as displaying status differences. A student from a small Texas town says, “A healthy percentage of all cliques would be equally represented at weekend beer bashes and countryside parties. This is the one place that preps, skaters, band members, and blacks all converge into one melting pot of new-generation culture ...”⁴⁹ This joint conspiracy and solidarity at beer bashes is in part because this involves illegal behavior. But even functions that are more official can involve multiple groups. This is often the role of the Homecoming Dance and the Junior–Senior Prom. A wide variety of the cliques and subgroups usually participate—though some do not. (In many schools gay and lesbian couples may be discouraged from attending.)⁵⁰ On one level, these events emphasize class and school solidarity—or at least solidarity among a substantial cross-section of the students. On the other hand, considerable differentiation occurs in terms of singles and those with dates, who dates whom, what pre- and post-dance parties are attended, and who sits and dances with whom. Whether the emphasis is on solidarity or status differentiation varies by school. Size seems to be a significant factor here. In small to medium size institutions, school-sponsored public events are likely to be seen as times of “togetherness.” In large high schools, however, the solidarity of particular subgroups seems to be strengthened.

The key point is that the preoccupation with partying is not simply a matter of adolescent exuberance rooted in “hormones”—though this clearly plays a role. Other status-conscious groups have also been preoccupied with partying. This includes most aristocracies, small-town upper classes, the various Social Registers, and the entertainment world’s “glitterati.” When status is a crucial form of power, the skillful display of expressive activity and relationships is a crucial determinant of rank.

Obviously the instrumental-expressive dimension is relevant to partying. Less obvious is its importance for friendships in sports teams.

SPORTS TEAMS AND RACE

Students on the same sports team were often friends, even though they had little else in common. That is, they hung out with one another at times other than in class or during practice. In most schools, sports teams that involve significant numbers of African Americans and whites—football, basketball, baseball, and track—were usually some of the most socially integrated subgroups in school. Undoubtedly, some of these friendships are the by-product of working together to win games. Another reason that cross-race friendships are more common on sports teams is that the membership on such teams gives them relatively high status.⁵¹ This enables minority students to resist the considerable pressure that exists in many schools against “acting white”—or in other ways

undercutting racial or ethnic solidarity and loyalty. A student from a southern urban school with considerable racial and class divisions says: “There were some students that were able to break the rules of the rigid structure within the school. Those affiliated with sporting events were able to belong to more than one group ... they were accepted by the other groups and accepted by each other ...”⁵²

Athletic team solidarity is not sustained when the season is over. A woman from the Tidewater area of Virginia observes:

During any particular season, the members of a team tended to hang out with other members of their team, but these friendships rarely seemed to carry over into the off season [when] members would return to their usual groups. For example, during my time, our wrestling team was ranked number two in the nation. During the wrestling season, wrestlers would hang out primarily with each other, but ... when wrestling season was not in session the wrestlers would hang out with whichever of the ... groups they were a part of.⁵³

The key theoretical point is that the common instrumental activity of the team and the relatively high status of the athletes made it possible to sustain expressive friendships across well-established social boundaries, including race. When the instrumental activity ceased, so did the expressive activity—not necessarily because the individuals were no longer personal friends, but because the instrumental shield that allowed the crossing of racial and crowd boundaries was removed and the salience of other associations and status groups prevailed.

CLUBS AND ASSOCIATIONS

The mix of instrumental and expressive elements also affects clubs and associations. This mix produces differences in who participates and the extent to which the boundaries of the club are open or closed. In a number of communities, some school organizations and some sports teams, which supposedly had various instrumental goals, were in effect near-private clubs. They tended to be dominated by one clique and others were discouraged from joining. Trying to be where you were not wanted was considered more degrading than rejection per se. A student notes, “Staying in high status school clubs ... where you were not wanted gave you the title of ‘wannabe.’”⁵⁴ In short, whether an organization was primarily instrumental or expressive depended upon whether it had a relatively concrete goal that involved more than concern about social relationships within the school. Where this was not the case, the ostensibly instrumental purposes were often a fig leaf for more expressive concerns. In such situations,

cross-group relationships were problematic. This was often true of golf, tennis, and lacrosse teams; they were frequently the domains of white upper-middle-class cliques. Similarly, particular cliques often dominate the staff of the school yearbook. In a school in the Houston area, “The popular girls also occupied the high positions on the yearbook staff (editors), and so the yearbook contained many more pictures of them than people from other groups.”⁵⁵ This is a rudimentary example of how elites not only have special privileges, but also bias the historical record. On the other hand, in many large high schools, clubs and associations tend to create links across groups. This is especially the case if these are high status organizations like the National Honor Society. But, the extent to which a social group’s activity is actually expressive or instrumental, or involves closed or open boundaries, is shaped by the particular historical and cultural context. As we will see from the analysis of music and drama groups, this will also be affected by the extent to which the activities are inherently expressive and ritualistic.

BANDS, ORCHESTRAS, DRAMA GROUPS, AND CHOIRS

In larger schools musical and drama groups offer an interesting contrast to sports teams. Clearly, artistic groups are engaged in a common purpose and often this involves competition with other outside groups. Nonetheless, these activities tend to create their own distinctive subculture and crowds, rather than integrating those from different social groups. Usually most members of the band and orchestra have low to moderate status in the eyes of other students and have relatively few ties to non-band members. A female from the Norfolk, Virginia, area comments:

Another group that tended to isolate themselves from the general student body was the Band/Orchestra/Chorus. This group spent a lot of time outside of class with one another. The three segments of this group shared a lot of the same characteristics, but were pretty separate from one another. They spent an enormous amount of time with their respective unit, and they had a unique solidarity and strong group identification.⁵⁶

A male from North Carolina says, “Participation in the school marching band or orchestra oftentimes served as a way for some students to develop [an] ... identity. There were always those kids who talked about famous composers perpetually and hung out in the band room during lunch and after classes.”⁵⁷ But in many schools this identity was not seen in a positive light and, as a student from New Jersey reports, they are “commonly known as ‘band fags.’”⁵⁸ A Texan who went to a large suburban school says: “Members of the band associated primarily with other band members ... For example, band members dated only band

members, and frowned upon their peers that did otherwise. In addition, if a band member did not fully dedicate their time to band, and the band only, they were not accepted.”⁵⁹ A guy from California says, “I remember there were cliques for whether you were a band member or not. The band/choir all hung out together ... The people who were interested in drama all hung out together and dated each other.”⁶⁰ I have fewer reports that specifically mention orchestras, but they seem to follow a pattern similar to that of bands. Clearly, this tendency of music and drama groups to be relatively self-contained is very widespread, especially in large schools.

Drama groups are an especially interesting case. They often adopt distinctive and extreme styles of dress and behavior. Hence the terms “drama freaks” or “drama queers.” A girl from a Washington, DC, suburb reports:

Another obvious clique ... was the DQs or drama queers. This ... contained all of the people that put on plays and any other type of theater-related production. This group was mainly recognized by the fact that many of them wore black all the time (some even wore black capes). This group usually ate lunch together in front of the theater—located at the opposite end of the school as the cafeteria. I think if you asked anyone in my class what their impression of the “DQs” was ... they would probably answer, “Weird” ... [T]hey always seemed to have an inside joke going that no one outside of their group ever got. Members of this group would throw temper tantrums during class if they disagreed with a teacher.⁶¹

There are similar reports from a variety of public institutions as well as private prep schools and Catholic schools. In contrast, in schools that do not have formal drama programs, solidarity among drama participants seems much more transient. While particular crowds may be overrepresented, student actors are often drawn from a variety of groups. The cast is often very close during the course of preparing and presenting a performance, but like sports teams, the solidarity declines when the “season” is over.

Compared to bands and drama groups, choirs seem more varied in the degree of insularity. Sometimes they follow the pattern of bands and drama groups. In some schools, African-American students are disproportionately represented in the choir. In other schools, however, choirs come closer to the model of major sports teams in that they draw people from an array of social groups. A student from a diverse school in central Virginia reports: “Another group that managed to combine the blacks, preps, nerds, and rednecks was choir. There was very little interaction between these people outside of class. For the most part people hung out with those in their own clique.”⁶²

How do we explain this tendency toward self-containment for bands/orchestras, choirs, and drama groups, as well as the differences between them?

First, in contrast to sports teams, these groups are seldom segregated by sex. Consequently, they offer opportunities for heterosexual romantic relationships and this greatly increases the probability of self-containment.⁶³ Second, they spend a lot of time together on a common activity. But gender composition and intense common activity are not a sufficient explanation; the first does not explain why bands/orchestras, choirs, and drama groups vary from one another and the second factor does not explain the differences between artistic groups and sports teams.

Rather this insularity is affected by three additional factors that are particularly characteristic of status-conscious social systems. First, in the eyes of most other students, band (and probably orchestra) is seen as a low-status activity and this is often publicly expressed, as the well-known terms “band nerd,” “band queer,” and “band fag” indicate. This low status, reinforced by the use of homophobic labels, seems to derive from several factors.⁶⁴ To play a musical instrument even reasonably well requires years of disciplined practice under the supervision of adults, so it is not accidental that one of the derisive terms is “band nerd.” Moreover, the activity is non-athletic and for the most part non-aggressive, and hence is defined as “unmanly,” an activity for “sis-sies,” or “fags and queers.” That is, it deviates from some of the key norms of the dominant groups in most high schools. Second, amateur music and drama are culturally defined primarily as expressive rather than competitive or instrumental activities. (Of course, this notion of art for art’s sake is an ideological exaggeration. Nonetheless most people learn to play a musical instrument because they enjoy doing it, not because they see it as the route to fame or fortune.)⁶⁵ Because music is a shared expressive activity, it creates and sustains an initial base of solidarity. This increases the likelihood that friendships, dating, and other forms of expressive association will occur within this group. Third, inherent in music and drama is ritual performance, which is a key source of social solidarity and closely associated with status processes. Subgroups or individuals may have special parts, but the key to a good performance is to carefully coordinate these efforts so that they produce a unified whole. The process of preparation involves going over the same material repeatedly until it becomes a complex but highly coordinated form of ritual performance. Bands engage not only in the rituals associated with music, but also marching, which is a highly stylized form of collective ritual. Similarly, drama involves learning stylized gestures and bodily movements. The combination of ritualized activities that increase solidarity, and the low regard and derision of other students motivates the creation of a counterculture that extols alternative values to those of more popular groups. When these second and third sources of solidarity are added to the first one of facing a common enemy (i.e., the majority of other students who hold this activity in low regard) we have a theoretical explanation for the insularity of these two groups.

Why are drama groups seen as even more “weird” than musical groups? Acting inherently involves taking on new and different social roles, that is, becoming other than one’s conventional self. It involves ritual, but a weaker form of ritual than music. The script of the play offers a common sequence of actions and words that is roughly the same for each performance. But unlike musical groups, parts are not usually performed simultaneously in unison, but rather are normally distinctly different for each character. Moreover, in amateur drama the internal ranking of individuals is less stable than for musical groups. Actors have to “try out” for each play and who gets the leading role often changes from production to production. In contrast, rankings in a band—first chair, second chair, etc.—are usually more stable. Unlike bands and sports teams, drama groups have no official uniforms. Consequently, we should expect that drama groups would have less solidarity than musical groups—unless they develop additional mechanisms to maintain their boundaries. This is precisely what they do by wearing “weird” clothes, makeup and jewelry, and self-consciously taking on the stereotypical attitudes and behavior of the alienated artist.⁶⁶

Why are choirs more variable in their degree of insularity? Singing generally requires significantly less sustained preparation to participate at the amateur level. Many students playing in a band or orchestra have taken several years of private instruction, but this is not often the case for high school singers. This also means that the status of this activity is more ambiguous, since one does not have to be a “music nerd” to participate.

In sum, both their insularity and variations in the degree and form of this insularity are due to structural factors largely related to the status position of the activity within the larger status structure of the high school. The theory of status relations predicts that when those of relatively low status experience disrespect, they will restrict their expressive associations (e.g., friendships and dating) to those of similar status and create boundary markers of their own. These processes are accentuated if the activities involve extended periods of intensive ritual-like activity. Bands, orchestras, drama groups, and, to a lesser extent, choirs illustrate this phenomenon. Sociologist Randall Collins’s theory of ritual interaction is relevant here. Collins suggests that the degree of solidarity and hostility to outsiders is due to differences in (1) social density, that is, the number of other people who are physically present,⁶⁷ (2) common focus of attention and mutual awareness, for example, saying a prayer together or watching the same ballgame, and (3) common emotional mood, such as reverence in worship or elation when the team you support wins. These are high in bands, drama groups, and choirs, and accordingly the solidarity of the groups is high. The theory of status relations clarifies several additional points. First, Collins’s theory does not address why these groups have relatively low status, and hence share a common emotion of suspicion toward outsiders. Second, it

does not explain why some kinds of relationships with outsiders are more likely than others. Why will band members gladly work with and cooperate with non-band members in rock bands or events such as football games, pep rallies, or joint choir-band concerts—all of which have the characteristics Collins's theory points to—but not date or eat with non-band members in the lunchroom? It is because boundaries are especially rigid when it comes to purely personal expressive relationships. In short, the theory of status relations and the theory of ritual interaction usefully supplement one another in helping us to understand the characteristics of these types of groups. (For a more extended discussion, see Appendix I.)

This leaves one obvious question. Why does popular music often create cross-group ties, while participating in school artistic groups creates boundaries? This contrast is due to the difference between consumption and production. It is relatively easy for an individual student to consume a variety of musical styles—and hence share common cultural forms with others. It is much more difficult to produce the same variety of music. Hence, those who produce music, even amateurs, tend to specialize in particular types of music and to associate with those who have a similar focus.

THE EFFECT OF TIME AND PLACE ON ASSOCIATIONS

Whether people from different groups could associate with one another was not only affected by whether it was instrumental or expressive, but also by the time and place of the interaction. Especially important is whether such relationships are highly visible or conflict with times that are usually devoted to a particular clique. A student from St. Petersburg, Florida, comments, "Students from different popularity groups found it acceptable to talk early in the morning or late after school. This was a neutral time that it was acceptable for anyone of any category to talk to each other. In some cases this was the only time that students who were friends in elementary school would talk in high school."⁶⁸ In other cases, neighborhoods provided the basis for cross-group friendships. Someone who went to a Connecticut high school describes two neighborhood cliques, the "Kelly School group" and "Flanders Street group."⁶⁹ With respect to the first: "The kids in this group had grown up together and their parents were close, thanks to PTA and Little League. Members of this group would separate during the school day [and associate with] various groups ... However, after school they would come back home and would hang out together either partying, playing sports, playing video games, or just hanging out." He notes that the second group behaved in a similar way. In part, the continued solidarity of each of these groups was related to their longstanding rivalry. "The big thing was the weekly tackle football games between the two neighborhood groups who seemed not to like each other—for no particular reason."⁷⁰ Typically, such

local groups maintain certain levels of friendship in the context of the neighborhood, or perhaps the school bus, but in the context of most school events, they would virtually ignore one another. What seems to be going on sociologically is that the saliency of the old neighborhood groups declines in significance in the newer and broader social context of the high school. The older relationships can, however, be activated in contexts where they are relatively invisible to the broader student body. But when outside associations are visible to school cliques—even though they occur in a completely different context—they may be denigrated. A girl from a small Texas town reports, “If you associate with someone outside of your clique outside of school it doesn’t do any harm until you come back to school and are teased about it until you just can’t stand it any longer.”⁷¹ She notes that how much teasing you received depended on your status in the group.

The point of this chapter has been to show the wide variety of situations in which students carefully regulate their associations and to explain the variations in the nature and dynamics of such associations. Groups care about their members’ associations because it affects the status of all. How rigorously associations are regulated depends on the mixture of instrumental and expressive elements, and the purpose and visibility of the relationship. These latter factors are, in turn, strongly affected by the time and location of the interaction. In general, when one’s group is “in session” and “on its own turf,” others should be ignored. At other times, cross-group relations are acceptable. Groups that are high or low in the status order, or whose activities are inherently ritualistic and expressive (such as musical and drama groups) are more likely to develop strong boundaries and distinctive subcultures.